

# on the MOVE

# "People see things aren't really there"

Story by Mike Latona • Photo illustration by Matthew Scott

Although she was only a small child at the time, Melissa Perry still remembers the extreme closeness she shared with her mother's best friend.

However, Melissa's family didn't get to continue the friendship because that young woman died when Melissa was only 4 years old. In subsequent years, Melissa has learned more about the sad circumstances that led to the friend's death.

"When she got divorced, she developed an eating disorder. She just took it so hard. She didn't think she was pretty, but she was perfect. She was *gorgeous*," said Melissa, 15, a parishioner at Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca. She added that the friend suffered such severe body damage that her kidneys eventually failed.

Diana Haggerty has discovered that many teenagers hold similarly negative self-images. Last year, as part of a health class project, Diana surveyed female class members at Hornell High School on how they perceived their appearances.

The replies, Diana recalled,

brought her to tears.

"I was so touched and hurt by what the girls were saying," said Diana, 16, from St. Ann's Church in Hornell. "They judged themselves so harshly."

She explained that many of the respondents — even those who had no apparent physical flaws — claimed there was nothing they liked about their bodies.

Where does this vicious cycle stem from? One major component, Diana said, lies within the message sent by society. She was recently reminded of this influence when she observed the models used on store posters at a mall.

"They were all gorgeous people. There was not one average-looking Joe," Diana said. "You're shown the image time and time again, and you think this is how it should be."

Melissa said she recently saw a television commercial in which a young man, after drinking a product designed to enhance his physique by adding muscles, suddenly became more popular.

"All these girls came to hang out with him," Melissa said with a laugh. "I said, 'That's not going to get you girls!'"

Even so, Maggie Donnelly said the onslaught of such advertisements is likely to spark feelings of inadequacy in teens.

"They say, 'I'm just little old me, and there's nothing perfect about me,'" said Maggie, 13, from St.

Mary's Church in Bath. "People are so self-conscious; they see things that aren't really there."

"What you think is wrong to you might not be wrong to someone else," Diana added. "It's what's inside that matters — but the girls, they don't believe that."

Melissa suggested that we can all help reverse this cycle by offering positive reinforcement to others.

"Maybe girls don't get told enough how pretty they are," she remarked.

In Maggie's opinion, the advertisements not only sell products — they also sell a big lie.

"The models are so perfect, but no real people are like that," Maggie commented.

This is sometimes literally true, said Theresa Litterer of Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. Litterer noted that models in several magazine advertisements are actually computer-generated — with "perfect" body parts being constructed to form a "person."

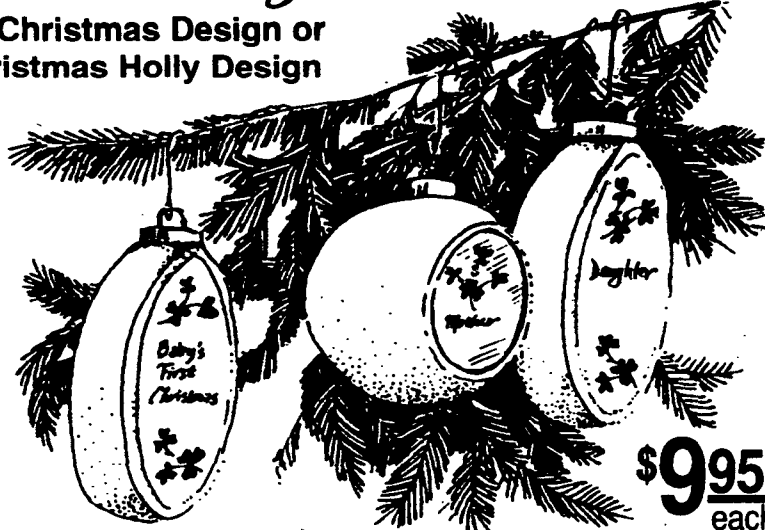
Such tactics, Litterer continued, reinforce in a young woman the idea that anything less than perfection is unacceptable.

"She'll think, 'If I'm slim, I'm beautiful — and I'm going to be happy,'" Litterer remarked. She said that many girls will risk physical harm to obtain this result.

Litterer is a nurse practitioner in Strong Hospital's Adolescent Eating Disorder Clinic. She said

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